

Register of Historic Kansas Places

Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating individual properties and districts. The format is similar to the National Register of Historic Places form. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "X" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets. Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Sells Brothers Building

Other name/site number _____

2. Location

Street & number 303-305 S. Kansas Ave. ☐ not for publication

City or town Topeka ☐ vicinity

State Kansas Code KS County Shawnee Code 177 Zip code 66603

3.,4. Certification

I hereby certify that this property is listed in the Register of Historic Kansas Places.

Patrick Zolner DSHPO 12/6/06
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- ☒ private
☐ public-local
☐ public-State
☐ public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- ☒ building(s)
☐ district
☐ site
☐ structure
☐ object

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	buildings
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	sites
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	structures
<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u>	total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter Categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/Specialty store=Furniture store

COMMERCE/Warehouse=Commercial Storage

FUNERARY/Mortuary=Undertakers

INDUSTRY/Manufacturing facility=Mattress company

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE/Business=Office Building

COMMERCE/Specialty Store=Lighting Store

DOMESTIC/Multiple Dwelling=Apartment Building

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

Foundation: Limestone

Walls: Limestone

Brick

Roof: Tar

Other: Tin

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for the State Register)

- ☐ **A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history
- ☐ **B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☒ **C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ **D** Property has yielded, or likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ **A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ **B** removed from its original location.
- ☐ **C** a birthplace or grave.
- ☐ **D** a cemetery.
- ☐ **E** a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ **F** a commemorative property.
- ☐ **G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Commerce

Industry

Period of Significance

1883-1956

Significant Dates

1883, 1956

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Builders: Lewis Sells, Allen Sells, Ephraim Sells, Peter Sells

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67)
has been requested
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey

- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering
Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	5	2	6	8	8	2	0	4	3	2	6	1	5	0
Zone			Easting					Northing						
2														

3														
Zone		Easting					Northing							
4														

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title Mark L. Burenheide

Organization Historic Landmark Development, Inc. Date 3/17/2006

Street & number 1101 SW Western Ave. Telephone (785) 235-6317

City or town Topeka State KS Zip code 66604

Property Owner

Name Historic Landmark Development, Inc.

Street & number 1101 SW Western Ave. Telephone (785) 235-6317

City or town Topeka State KS Zip code 66604

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Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

Architectural Description

The Sells Brothers Building is located at 303-305 S. Kansas Avenue in Topeka, Shawnee County, Kansas. The building is a two-story, Victorian, commercial building and is situated on the Northern end of Kansas Avenue and Downtown Topeka. The first story houses a commercial business, and had modifications in the early 1950s, while the upper story retains a great deal of its original Victorian character. The building was constructed in 1883 and is one of the few Victorian-style, commercial buildings left in that area of Downtown Topeka. The Sells Brothers Building is being nominated to the Register of Historic Kansas Places under Criterion C for architecture.

Elaboration

Exterior

The Sells Brothers building is a two-story commercial building. The building has a brick façade, with side and rear walls of rough-cut limestone. The dimensions of the building are roughly 50 feet across by 100 feet long. Originally the lower or first level Kansas Avenue façade was fitted with two separate storefronts for 303 and 305. During the 1950s the storefront of 305 was remodeled, removing the storefront and replacing it with two rows of windows and creating an interior mezzanine.

The storefront of 303 was also changed in the 1950s but retains its commercial appearance and retail functions from that time. The modern storefront features large, single-pane display windows and an inset entrance on the left side (when facing the store). The entrance is a single, wooden door with a pane of glass. The door is flanked by single-pane sidelights and a transom (currently infilled with an Air Conditioner unit). A large business sign fills the transom space above the display windows. Portions of the original cast-iron storefront are still apparent and provide aesthetic detail to the buildings current appearance.

Entrance to 305 is gained through 303 and an interior door. The brick façade of 305 was incorporated in the 1950s renovation to allow the space to be used for offices and storage. The exterior is currently composed of two rows of 5 windows with a limestone sill course at each row. The windows are a three-pane horizontal arrangement. The middle windows, and windows on each of the outer ends, are operable and open outward

The upper façade retains most of its original features. The upper floor has six bays with brick pilasters separating the windows. The lintels are limestone with carved scrollwork. Bays three and four are centrally located across the front of 303-305 and have paired windows each topped by a curved decorative lintel. A Victorian "ying-yang diamond" separates the two windows at the top. The remaining windows are singled double-hung windows with segmented arches and keystones. The cornice is metal, galvanized iron according to the 1883 building permit, its frieze bracketed and decorated. Above the ornate, central windows of bays three and four a raking cornice rises to a pediment topped with an acroteria. This section of the cornice that also slopes contains modillions and

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bulls eyes. The horizontal section of cornice contains an egg and dart pattern on both sides of the raking cornice.

The fenestration along the front façade of the second story is divided along the brick pilasters into six bays running across both the 303 and 305 sections of the building. The central bays (one over 303 and one over 305) each have a pair of one-over-one wood windows with a three-sided clipped-arch top. The lintels above are a decorative limestone with a Victorian pattern described previously. One either side of the central bays are two bays, each containing a single window—one per each bay. The windows are two-over-two double-hung windows with a brick and limestone, segmented lintel. All the windows are wood frame. The original windows of both 303 and 305 S. Kansas were removed and infilled during modifications to the building. However, in 2006, the original window openings were restored, and with the aid of historic photos, wood windows matching the appearance of the original windows were installed.

The rear of the building is plain, rough-cut limestone with brick arches above the restored double-hung windows on the second floor. The first floor windows are also double hung. The building retains its early rear-entry double door that overlooks a new cement loading dock. A set of stairs, at the south end of the building, provides access to the second floor.

Interior

The interior of the Sells Brothers Building is divided into two spaces, and has modifications dating from the 1950s that support two distinct functions within the commercial space. The first floor of 303 is currently a retail business. Shelving is placed in the open spaces and there is a door that accesses an adjoining showroom inside of 301 S. Kansas, a separate building. There are still hardwood floors found throughout the building. Some of the high traffic areas have linoleum flooring covering the original floors. Inside of 303, there is a 20-foot wooden countertop that separates the stock shelves from the public, retail areas.

Entrance into 305 is gained through a door off the retail space in 303. The interior of 305 currently houses offices, and storage for the commercial business in 303.

One of the major changes that occurred in the 1950s renovation was the addition of a mezzanine in both 303 and 305. The mezzanine was constructed with steel support beams and wood floors. The mezzanine was built into the first floor space it runs 75 to the back of the store, and does not affect the size and dimensions of the second floors.

At the rear of the building the store reopens to its original height in both 303 and 305. In 303, this space houses the operable freight elevator and the rear loading dock doors. The area around those doors is used to prepare orders for customer pickup or delivery. Access to the basement stairs is found here in the back portion of 303. And 305 features a bathroom, and a large built-in scale that has been modified to allow for the staircase to the apartments on the second floor. Storage space is abundant in this area.

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Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

The staircase descends into the basement from 303. To the west of the staircase is an access area that connects 303 and 305. The basement is entirely devoted to product storage and HVAC. 303 has an area that has been dug out for conduit storage along its south walls. Both 303 and 305 have the arched openings that originally gave access to the alley for the horse drawn hearses dating from the time when the building housed an undertaking business. There is a door from the basement of 303 that allows access to 301 S. Kansas.

The second floor of the Sells Brothers building is divided but has openings that allow for passage between both spaces. The second floor has functioned in several capacities over the years, but plans are in place to convert the open spaces into Loft spaces. These plans will work with the *Secretary of the Interior's Standards of Rehabilitation* to preserve the character and re-use the current features and space.

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Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

Significance

The Sells brother's 1883 Commercial Block at 303-305 S. Kansas Avenue is one of the last surviving architecturally significant 19th century buildings on lower Kansas Avenue in Downtown Topeka. All early structures on the east side of Kansas Avenue, north of Sixth Street were removed in a 1960s urban renewal project, with the exception of one or two early 1900s warehouses or commission buildings. Thus, 303-305 S. Kansas, with its decorative upper story and metal cornice largely intact, is a rare example of Victorian architecture in this section of downtown.

Elaboration

The four Sells brothers—Allen, Ephraim, Lewis and Peter—were best remembered as circus owners (Sells Brothers Circus and Sells-Floto Circus) whose shows often wintered in Topeka in the late 1870s. However, they also invested heavily in Topeka real estate with numerous properties in downtown and else where, among them the Windsor and Chesterfield hotels plus an important office block at 628-639 S. Kansas Avenue. Lewis Sells' name appears on deeds for lots 75 and 77 (#303-305) in 1881, and the "Sells Bros." are recorded as taking out building permit #2578 on May 24, 1883, for a two-story brick and stone "Business House" featuring a galvanized iron cornice, six flues, and two 6x10 skylights all for an estimated cost of \$12,000.

At the time of its completion in the summer of 1883, lower Kansas Avenue was already in transition, no longer at or near the heart of downtown that, by that time, was moving south or "up" the Avenue to the 700 and 800 blocks. Reflecting this change during Topeka's late 1880s building boom, lower Kansas Avenue became home for manufacturing, produce commission houses, and warehouses. Not infrequently upper floors were utilized for residential purposes, often for the proprietors of the businesses below. Excluding the Throop Hotel at 4th and Kansas, 303 – 305 S. Kansas Avenue was the more prominent structures in the 300 block.

The address of 303-305 S. Kansas Avenue stands at the edge of a turn-of-the-century district called "Smoky Row." Little is known about the name's origin, apparently commonly used in the 1890s but passé' by around 1905; however, the term presumably refers to the smoke filled environments of the numerous illegal liquor joints or dives found up and down lower Kansas Avenue. Topekans identified the area as lower Kansas Avenue south from the river to 2nd or 3rd streets. It was known as an area where "there is little else but drinking, carousing and gambling from one end of Smoky Row to the other," the September 28, 1894, Mail & Breeze quoted a former resident thereof, "they pretend to run restaurants, hotels and barber shops, but they are really the very lowest dives..." A decade later the April 24, 1904, Daily Capital declared Smoky Row largely dead, replaced by "The Bottoms" an area immediately northeast of 303-305 S. Kansas and bounded by the Avenue on the west, the Kansas river to the north, the Santa Fe Shops to the east, and from the south anywhere from 1st to 4th or even 5th streets. (Depending upon whom one asked). The information from the city directories shows that towards the end of this period, the Sells Brothers building stood vacant.

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Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

City directories record the following information:

303 S. Kansas Avenue

1890 – 1891	Charles Mosser Furniture Dealer
1899 – 1900	Brokaw Brothers and Co. (Furniture and Stoves)
1907 – 1909	Charles Bennett Furniture, Charles Bennett owner
1909 – 1912	H.C. Hall Furniture
1912 – 1926	ACME Furniture, Charles Bennett Manager
1929 – 1942	Vacant
1942 – Present	Kansas Electric Supply

305 S. Kansas Avenue

1887 – 1902	Duplex Spring Co.
1902 – 1905	McEntire Brothers
1905 – 1909	Vacant
1909 – 1912	E.E Feurt, Barrel Manufacturing
1913 –	Auto Sales Room
1926 –	Topeka Undertaking
1935 – 1942	Vacant
1942 – 1948	Vernon Bixby Antiques
1948 – Present	Kansas Electric Supply

The building remained in the Sells family until 1913 when Rhoda Sells, the widow of Lewis Sells, passed ownership of the property on to a Real Estate Company out of Delaware.

Quite likely the best known, as well as one of the earliest tenants in the Sells Building was McEntire Brothers, a bed and mattress, manufacturing firm. Originally called the Duplex Spring Bed Co., it was first listed at 305 S. Kansas Avenue in the 1887-88 city directory and for the last time in the 1905 edition.

According to newspaper stories and company histories, Richard S. McEntire moved his Burlington, Iowa mattress firm to Topeka in 1887. Shortly after arrival, unexpectedly, a partner absconded with the business' capital thereby creating financial hardship for the McEntire family. This may, at least in part, explain why the 1887-88 directory record Richard along with sons George and Ralph as residing at 305 S. Kansas Avenue. The October 15, 1950, Capital feature about the firm noted how "they opened a warehouse in part of the building (#305) leased for the bed-spring factory." With the elder McEntire's death in 1896, the company was renamed "McEntire Brothers" (for George and Ralph), and it utilized the entire space at 305 S. Kansas Avenue. The second floor was for bedspring manufacturing and the

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Sells Brothers Building
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first floor was for mattress manufacturing. The basement was for storage of materials for manufacturing. Business prospered and expanded into 307 and 309 S Kansas Avenue by 1905.

Prior to the expansion south, indeed an event that helped precipitate it, fire damaged the rear portion of the building that housed the manufacturing. Esther McEntire in the Topeka Genealogical Society's 1976 publication Kansas Pioneers (P. 310) quotes Ralph McEntire on how it occurred: "We were working evenings, and one evening one of the boys sneaked to the backroom feeling that he just must have a smoke even if there were strict fire rules against it. He happened to flip his match so that it dropped in the drip pan under a barrel of japan and the fire started. I turned in the alarm and stood at the door to tell about the open elevator, the basement full of excelsior, etc. As usual, the firemen had no time to waste with a youngster – refused to listen – turned their hose on the barrel – knocked it down the elevator shaft and into the excelsior and we had a real fire."

Despite the new space afforded by 307 and 309 S. Kansas, the business required yet more room. A local lumberman named L.A. Gillette provided the solution with a new and much larger plant in the 200 block of Quincy, suitable for their manufacturing purposes (remaining here until 1965, the firm closing for good in the 1980s). Thus, other business found a home at 303-305 S. Kansas though for a lengthy span in the late 1930s the premises stood vacant.

The current tenant, Kansas Electric Supply purchased the building in 1942 and moved in with their business. They remodeled the building in the early 1950s to its current appearance and functions.

The Sells Brothers Building was built in the style of a two-part commercial block building. This building type was most prevalent in American buildings between 1850 and 1950. The two-part commercial block is "the most common type of composition used for small and moderate sized commercial buildings throughout the country." Generally, two-part commercial buildings in this style are two or four stories in height and have a distinct storefront and a distinct upper story. The Sells Building both in its original 1883 design and the current appearance has a distinct horizontal division between the two-stories, and thus maintains that style even with modifications. And the Sells Brothers building is one of the few remaining examples of the two-part commercial block style remaining in the north end of Downtown Topeka.

Summary

The Sells Brothers building is being nominated for the Register of Historic Kansas Places under Criterion C for Architecture. It is a good example of a Victorian commercial building, and one of the few remaining buildings built at that time that remains in that section of downtown Kansas Avenue. The renovations and modifications to the exterior do not make the building eligible for National Register listing, but many of the building's components, details, and characteristics from its 1883 construction are still found throughout the building and will be preserved for future use. These character defining architectural features signify an important part of the development of Topeka's commercial business, and also stand as part of the vision of the Sells Brothers for Topeka.

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Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

Bibliography

City of Topeka Building Permits

Connelley, William E., comp., History of Kansas, State and People, The American Historical Society, Inc., Vol. IV, 1928, p. 2009

David, Ken, "Topeka Company Has Built Mattresses For 63 Years...", Topeka Daily Capital, October 15, 1950.

"Joints and Dives," Topeka Mail & Breeze, September 28, 1894.

"Kansas Makes the Bedding in the World," Topeka State Journal, March 2, 1935.

King, Orin C., The Circus World of Willie Sells, Shawnee County Historical Society, Bulletin #60, 1983, pp. 155-200.

McEntire, Esther, "McEntire Mattress Company," Kansas Pioneers, The Topeka Genealogical Society, 1976, pp. 308-310.

Polk's City Directory, various dates.

Radges' City Directory, various dates.

Sanborn Insurance Fire Map, 1883, 1885 and 1889.

"Successor to Smoky Row," Topeka Daily Capital, April 24, 1904.

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 75 & 77 on Kansas Avenue in the City of Topeka, situated upon Section 31, in Township 11, South of Range 16, Shawnee County

Boundary Justification

This boundary reflects the property associated with the building as it was originally constructed.

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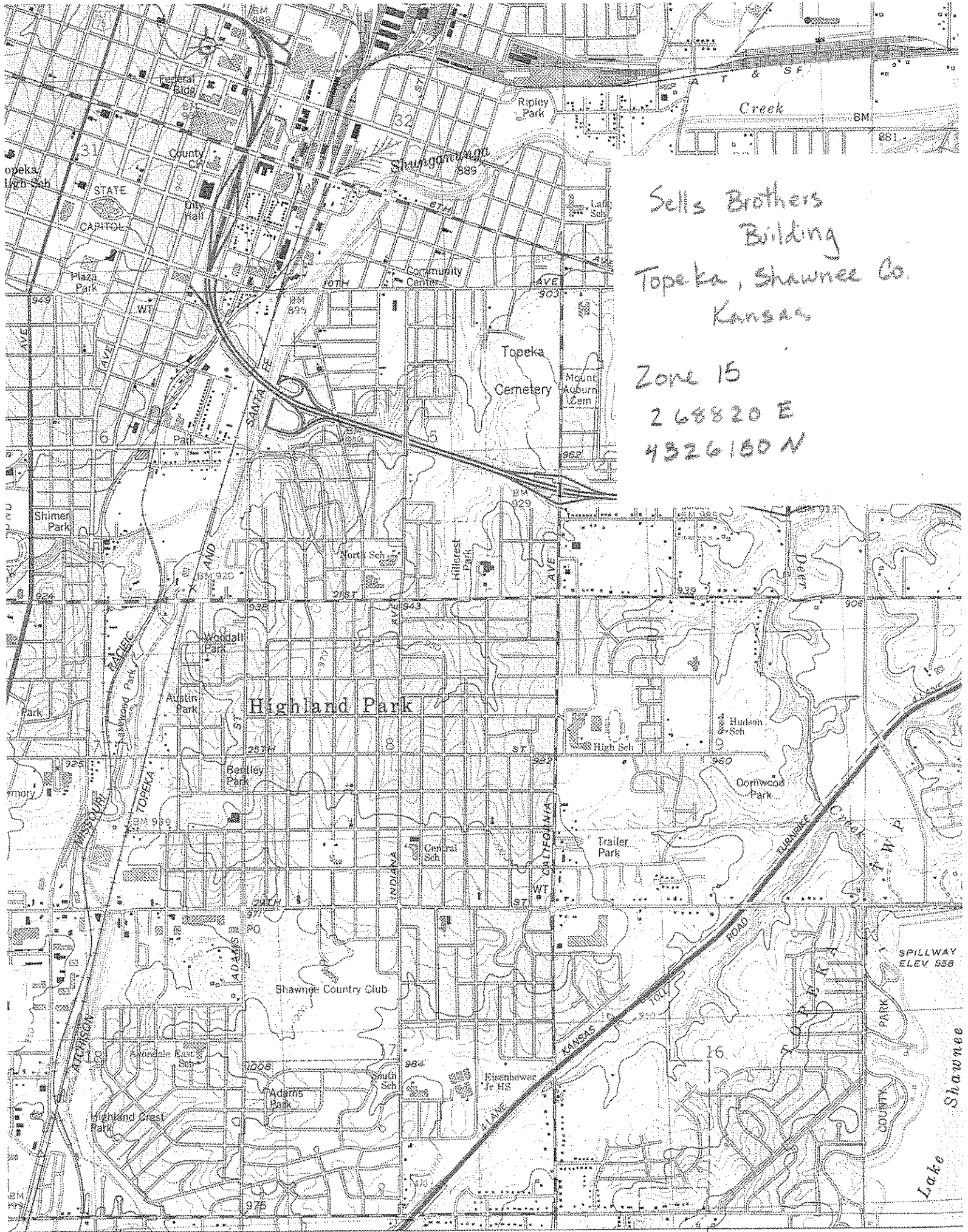
Sells Brothers Building
Shawnee Co., Kansas

Photographic Information

The following information is consistent for all photographs:

1. Sells Brothers Building
2. Shawnee County, Kansas
3. Photographer: Kristen Lonard
4. August 23, 2006
5. Digital Photographs on file at the Kansas State Historical Society

Photo #1:	East (front) elevation, view from the east
Photo #2:	East (front) elevation, close-up of the Cornice, view from the northeast
Photo #3:	West (rear) elevation, view from the southwest
Photo #4:	Interior, basement, view from the east
Photo #5:	Interior, basement view from the west
Photo #6:	Interior, basement, original wood flooring, view from the west
Photo #7:	Interior, mezzanine, shelving, storage, view from the west
Photo #8:	Interior, First floor, view from the southwest
Photo #9:	Interior, First floor, sales area, view from the east
Photo #10:	Interior, Second floor, view from the west
Photo #11:	Interior, Second floor, skylight, view from the southwest (below)
Photo #12:	Interior, Second floor, view from the west
Photo #13:	Interior, Second floor, view from the southeast



Sells Brothers
Building
Topeka, Shawnee Co.
Kansas

Zone 15
2 68820 E
4326150 N